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ABSTRACT

The way that the Open University system in Great Britain operates and the use of the mass media are discussed in detail. A number of problems the adult student is likely to face are identified, along with basic differences between U.S. and British societies that influence the application of an open university approach. Attention is directed to: admissions policy, degree requirements, student costs, people who were influential in the planning and development of the Open University, the university's printing and mailing operations, new course development, the structure and procedures of the academic staffs (i.e., course teams), the university's Institute of Educational Technology, developmental testing of courses, the production of media elements, the outside tutorial staff, the program "Bartholomew Fair," and auxiliary studies. Problems that may occur for adult students include: the competing home atmosphere, adults may be out of the habit of learning and may fear failure, the educational experience may change the student's personal and family relations, and the student must learn a new technique of studying with the television mode. Differences in the type of universities, population distribution, broadcasting, and postal service in the United States and Great Britain are noted. (SW)

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Britain's Open University, User of Mass Media

by William Stephenson

Presented to Temple University Seminar on

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Great Britain's Open University has quickly risen to fame in the academic world since it began accepting students in 1971. The degrees it grants are accepted as first-class credentials across Britain. Its methods, sharply departing from traditional academic ways, are studied, imitated, and adopted around the world. Even universities and colleges not making direct use of Open University practises have begun to re-evaluate their offerings in light of what the Open University offers its students. It has been called the most important new development in higher education since the land-grant college. As this paper will explain, its uniqueness comes from its acceptance and successful use of the popular mass media of the twentieth century in the teaching of its many students.

A fact sheet setting out the nature of the Open University would need to say that it was created by Britain's Labour government in the 1960's as a degree-granting institution for adults, with 21 as the minimum age for enrollment.[1] The aim was to offer a second chance at higher education for the many Britons who have academic capability, but who somehow at an earlier age were deflected from advanced studies by Britain's highly selective educational system. The university is funded by direct grant of sixty million pounds a year from the British government, and also charges modest fees to the students.

Degrees are offered in six areas, called the university's "faculties": Arts, Education, Mathematics, Science, Social Science, and Technology. Admissions policy is completely open, with no prerequisite

training or credentials. There are some limits on entrance, however: quotas exist for Great Britain's various regions, to keep enrollment from being concentrated too much in any one region, and limits are set on the number of students who can be enrolled in each particular faculty. Approximately fifty thousand students apply each year, from which about twenty-five thousand are finally admitted. Over the years, the Arts, Education, and Social Science programs have proven so popular that a waiting list of applicants has had to be made, with a waiting period of up to two years.

The university is not a residential one. Students live at home and study in whatever time they have outside of working hours. They receive regular mailings of printed "units" for study, and are assigned additional readings in "set books" or "readers" for their course. They can tune in programs pertaining to their course on BBC television and radio; these are broadcast in the early mornings and on weekends. They may consult tutors at 255 local study centres, who answer their questions and review the material of the units. These tutors also grade certain essay examinations given during the course; Open University computers at university headquarters in Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, grade other objective exams. Students in most courses are required to attend a one-week seminar held at some college campus, for intensive work and for a taste of the collegiate life of a conventional campus. The school year begins in January and continues without interruption through the summer, ending with final examinations in November.

Each faculty offers one "foundation" course which all students must take, and various others of advancing difficulty, known as second, third, and fourth level courses, among which the student may choose. Some courses are interdisciplinary. The range of material for each course is extensive, to the point that one course per school year is considered a full load. The university estimates that ten to twelve hours of preparation are needed each week for the work of the course; students have said it is more like fifteen to twenty hours a week. Six courses are required for graduation with a degree, and eight courses for an Honours degree. About five thousand per year now graduate. The aim of the university is to produce generalists, at home with many aspects of a field, not just one of its special aspects. An employer or a post-graduate institution, say Open University officials, can then add whatever specialized knowledge is needed.

Part of the appeal of the university for the students is its low cost. According to a 1982 estimate, a student's total outlay for a degree will only be £1200 to 1300.[2] Fees for courses are modest, though pushed upward each year recently by inflation. There are no residential expenses for the student, a major cost at conventional universities. There is a fee for the summer seminar. The set books and readers required will cost the student extra each year, but he then retains them in his possession.

Part of the international interest in the Open University among educators also comes from its notable cost-effectiveness. A large staff must be maintained at Milton Keynes to design, produce, and revise each faculty's courses, but a single course in a single year

may enroll 5000 students, and the course can be repeated with only minor changes for some years to come. Thus economies of scale are attained. The cost per equivalent undergraduate is little more than a quarter of the costs at conventional universities.[3] The faculty: student ratio is about 1:200.[4]

The Open University began in the 1960's as an idea in the mind of Harold Wilson, Labour Prime Minister. He visualized an institution that by a combination of Britain's efficient postal service and its national broadcasting facilities at the BBC, should offer courses combining broadcast instruction with correspondence tutoring. By these means all the working adults who wanted a university degree could obtain one, if they persevered at individual study. The institution was to be known as the "University of the Air," stressing its basis in the broadcast media.

When Wilson took office in October, 1964, he announced his plan as a settled goal of the incoming Labour government. "It was never party policy, nor did it feature in Labour's election manifesto," Wilson has since written. "But our political history is full of cases where the Prime Minister has a private hobby-horse and is determined to use the not inconsiderable resources of his office to get it through."[5] The response to the announcement, from educational leaders in Britain, was almost entirely negative. They thought the plan could not work, would produce only a few graduates with inferior training, and would meanwhile divert government money away from schools already established.

The next key figure in the evolution of the Open University now appeared: Jennie Lee, a Labour politician whom Wilson appointed Minister of Arts in the Department of Education and Science, with a special charge to develop a "University of the Air." Described as "a politician of steely, imperious will, coupled both with tenacity and charm, who was no respecter of protocol and would refuse to be defeated or frustrated by the skepticism about the university," she threw herself into the efforts needed to bring it into being. "It is universally agreed that the university became like a religion to her." The most common explanation of her fervor is that "she saw the university as an abiding memorial to Aneurin Bevan [her late husband and Labour Party leader] . . . offering a university education to those (like him) who were deprived of it, mainly by their social background, earlier in their lives."[6]

She formed an Advisory Committee of public leaders to make broad plans, and negotiations with the BBC were begun. A White Paper of this committee's authorship appeared in 1966, detailing the possibilities for the new university. For a period of many months, Jennie Lee planned to bring a new fourth television channel into existence exclusively for educational broadcasting. In the end, however, the university's broadcasts for courses on TV came from BBC-TV 1 and 2.

Her next crucial move was to set up a Planning Committee of eminent educators, under the chairmanship of Sir Peter Venables, vice-chancellor of Aston University. Among many other primary decisions, this committee made the innovative decision to have a January-November school year. Their final report went to the

Secretary of State for Education and Science on December 31, 1968, and the government made a firm commitment to go ahead with the plans in January, 1969. (The history of the university's early development under political auspices was much more complicated than this summary can suggest. A product of determination, idealism, innovative decisions, deference to established powers, political horsetrading, and old-boyism, it seems that only the British social and governmental systems could have brought such a university into being.)[7]

The third crucial figure for the university's development came on the scene at this time. He was the Planning Committee's choice for Vice-Chancellor, the executive head of the Open University: Walter Perry, a Scottish academic, formerly Professor of Pharmacology and Vice-Principal of Edinburgh University. Perry describes himself as one welcoming challenges in education, and at the nascent university "the challenge was the extreme difficulty of effective teaching at a distance [i.e., by broadcast and correspondence]."[8] Perry was as determined as Jennie Lee that standards of instruction must be as high as those at Oxford and Cambridge, so that the institution would be "the university of the second chance, not the second choice."[9] How to bring that about for non-residential, spare-time students was a knotty question. The drive Perry put into its solution may be measured by the fact he worked eighteen-hour days for a year and a half, at which time he suffered a serious heart attack while still in his forties.

Perry and the staff he chose were compelled to decide about many more details of the university than the Planning Committee had had to do. One basic decision he made himself accounts for a feature of

policy that has puzzled many observers: the use of one course per year, which engages the student's full time and attention. Unknown in England and America, such courses are the standard in Scottish universities, Perry says, and it was natural for him to take them as his pattern.[10]

A very important decision made early by these academic planners was that broadcast media simply could not provide adequately detailed instruction by themselves, and that considerably more use of printed material must be made than originally planned. From this came the change of name from "University of the Air" to "Open University." The decision did not mean exactly that popular media were less central to the university. What the planners did was to bring to the design of their printed units of instruction a standard of design, typography, and illustration comparable to the popular magazines of today. They deemed it no academic sin to make these units as attractive and appealing to the eye as any other popular publication found in the student's home. That way a lonely student might be motivated to go on studying one more evening, rather than giving up and turning to something less demanding. Thus the units have glossy, colorful covers. Inside, the design makes use of innovative layout and easily readable print, accompanied by numerous photos and drawings. The units even have a size comparable to many magazines, 8 1/2" by 11", and are as light to pick up as any magazine. The planners in fact have adapted the standards of a popular print medium to the ends of higher education.

Perry and the core staff of 170 chosen to produce the first courses of the six faculties made their headquarters in a disused country house called Walton Hall, near Milton Keynes, and about fifty miles by rail from London. Thus the planning facility was in easy travel distance back and forth for the BBC staff, whose headquarters were at the Alexandra Palace in London. Today the BBC facility is in a large building across from Walton Hall; it is said to be the most extensive facility for educational television anywhere in the world.[11] In addition, more than twenty other buildings have by now sprung up all around Walton Hall, almost hiding it. They include office and meeting-room buildings for the academic staff, and other buildings devoted to the technical demands of the university, including a large computer center. Elsewhere in the Milton Keynes area are further buildings serving as warehouses and dispatching centers for the university's enormous printing and mailing operations. The newer buildings are of contemporary design, in brick; the campus now looks like some sizable community college in the U.S.

Today the university offers more than two hundred courses. Proposals for new courses may be drawn up by members of any faculty, and presented to a university Course Committee for necessary approval. If that body concurs, the plan goes next to a Course Resources Committee for evaluation of what its mix of media will need to be, and if the total production facilities of the university will be able to provide the mix during the developmental period of the course. If the plan is approved by this body, its actual design and production may get underway.

The need to plan and carry out teaching without any real contact between professor and student, which teaching through media imposes, has dictated the unique structure and procedures of the academic staffs at Milton Keynes. All design and implementation of a particular course is done by a large group known as its "course-team." Usually the team numbers fifteen or sixteen, but the figure may go considerably higher. Included in the personnel of each team are representatives of a number of different professional groups needed for Open University work.

There are, first, a number of academics (the word used by the university instead of "lecturers" or "professors") from the faculty in whose general area the course falls. In the case of an inter-disciplinary course academics will be drawn from the several faculties involved. They are chosen for their particular knowledge of some area which will be addressed in the course. At times, the university will hire temporary academics to bring some special expertise to the course not available among the university's permanent academics. Together the course-team members in conference work out a basic syllabus for the offering. Then, usually, the course-team divides into smaller separate "working groups" to develop the various subdivisions of the syllabus into what is usually 32 units of study. At times, a working group will share responsibility for developing all of its units; at other times, one academic may be given full responsibility for a certain small number of units, which he then submits to the working group and the entire course-team for their approval. In the Science faculty, the course-team must also design kits for home

experiments to be done by each student. In the Arts faculty, individual projects for each student to work through on his own may need to be conceived.

The team further contains one or more representatives of the university's Institute of Educational Technology (IET). John Ferguson, head of the Arts faculty, writes, "Similarly named organizations may exist in other universities. I doubt if any performs quite the function, or rather functions, of this one." The Institute came into existence because Walter Perry and his pioneer staff realized that something must take the place of the personal classroom contact a professor has with his students at conventional universities. There a professor hears his students' questions day by day, sees their progress and errors at each step of the syllabus, and can adjust his teaching accordingly. That could not be done for a pre-planned course which must instruct a large and diverse group of adults working alone in their homes. There was need for someone on each course-team to set and demand a high rate of clarity. This person, trained in educational techniques and methods, would be there to insist that course objectives be defined and kept clearly in mind among all the academics, that the course's vocabulary be agreed on, that all members of the team agreed on what responses from students would be considered to show satisfactory knowledge of a unit's content, that the connections of each unit to the rest of the course be clearly laid out for the students, and that fair and equitable means of testing be agreed on. Thus the students would find their distance-teaching as little confusing as possible. These

professionals became the IET. "David Hawkridge, their Director, says succinctly that their teaching concern is not what, but how."[12]

The IET further is responsible for developmental testing of all parts of the course, trying out the units and programs and tests on selected groups of students and analyzing their responses. The IET keeps on testing all during the lifespan of a course, so that any unexpected weaknesses in it may be caught and eliminated. The IET also runs opinion surveys of the students in courses each year, to gauge their reaction on such points as the usefulness of a unit, or the demands of preparation time it made. Further reactions to a course are solicited from the regional tutorial staffs. Finally, the IET makes statistical studies of the exams to determine how many students failed a particular question or those in a certain area of one unit, and so on, for the guidance of the academics during revision.

Another member of a course-team is a "staff tutor," representing the outside tutorial staff who meet weekly with the students of a course all across Britain. His job is to see that the demands made by any unit do not exceed the services the various local centres and their part-time staff can provide. The local tutors are made up of staff from conventional colleges and polytechnics who wish to earn extra money, and of academics now retired, and of university-trained women who because of personal circumstances (such as small children at home) can only give part time to teaching. It is essential that this varied group all be able to understand and explain what the units present by way of media, that they comprehend the overall plan of the course and reflect it in their personal tutoring, and that they all

apply basically the same standards in evaluating the essay exams the students submit to them. The staff tutor is their voice on a course-team, and their liaison with the academics who design a course.

Further members of a course-team are those involved with the production of its media elements. This includes not only BBC producers for television and radio, but editorial staff for the printed units and other printed material. The university also has a sizable group of graphics specialists, to work with both the BBC and the editorial personnel in courses where a number of graphs, diagrams, animated drawings, and so on, must be provided.

The BBC followed a special strategy in providing producers for the Open University, which should be noted. They did not hire producers skilled in television or radio production, and then hope those producers could adjust to the needs of academic teaching. Instead, they hired people with advanced academic training, who knew themselves what teaching calls for, and then gave them crash training in production techniques. This meant, says a senior academic of the Open University,

> that they were able to become in the fullest possible way members of course teams. They made often very forceful contributions to academic discussions; they criticized written drafts, whether of course work or of [scripts for] broadcast, with equal aplomb. . . . I should go so far as to say that the particular quality of those recruited by the BBC was a major factor in developing a really integrated approach to the media, so that we neither thought of the broadcast programmes as adjuncts to the written material nor of the written material as a series of footnotes to the broadcasts, but conceived all elements as integral parts of a single whole.[13]

At the head of each course-team is a chairman, who presides over the development of the course syllabus, the assignment of academics to specific working groups, the completion of units and broadcasts on schedule and within budget, the writing of assignments and tutor-notes, the creation of examinations, and any necessary alterations in the course if weaknesses or errors are found. The chairman calls in outside consultants as necessary, for some particular contribution to a course, and for review of the completed course and its examinations. Assisting the chairman throughout is a special functionary called a Course Assistant, whose job is to check the flow of course material according to the team's agreed schedule, to handle small problems of layout, of editing, of permissions to quote, and so on--in a word, to see that the whole giant enterprise progresses as smoothly as human capabilities will allow.

Various secretaries work with the course-team, too, from the large secretarial pool of the university. Each course-team generates a deluge of paper, in teaching units and scripts and memos, any one of which may require multiple drafts for the whole team to peruse. So heavy is the demand for material to be typed, retyped, reproduced and distributed that the ratio of secretaries to academic staff is about one to two. "Most universities do not depend on secretaries to any great extent for their teaching material. We are utterly dependent on them, so that the secretaries are in a real sense members of a team, and are treated as such. . . ."[14]

So complex and involuted is the process of course production that it should be no surprise to hear that a course may demand the team

academics' full time for two or three years before it is completed, and more time may be demanded for later revisions. From development through use and on to remaking and/or scrapping, the life of a course may be about ten years.

Neither should it seem surprising that to be an academic at the Open University requires a special blend of professional and personal traits. The successful one needs interest and knowledge in a number of the aspects of his field, rather than just one. He must be able to work without the usual stimulation of immediate student response in a classroom; he faces students, if at all, only in a possible stint as a teacher of a summer seminar. He needs to be able to write fluently, and under considerable pressures to meet deadlines. He must be able to work closely with a number of other academics and specialists, to tolerate their idiosyncracies and pet notions, and to subordinate his own perception of a topic if the team as a whole decides on another approach. He must be willing to put his professional work up for display before his colleagues, and before the public nationwide, and to face criticism from all sides; there is no classroom privacy for him, as there is at conventional universities. He must be able to conceptualize which areas of his material for a course will need radio, or television, and which will be best presented in print. He must be able to face television cameras and radio microphones for any required media broadcasts where a lecturer's presence is needed for effective presentation.

Walter Perry notes two particular disadvantages about Open University academic work. The first is that since the institution is

virtually unique, there is nowhere else to market one's skills and experience if one becomes dissatisfied at Milton Keynes. The second is that course-team work is so time-consuming the academic finds he has no time left for his own research and further study, except in accumulated months of released time granted him over the years. A number of special advantages may well balance these drawbacks, however. There is a sense of creative pride from one's part in the production of a widely esteemed course. There is the special public recognition that comes with appearance on national television. There is release from the usual academic routine of presenting familiar material to one crop of students after another over the years, or in several sections of a large course at one time. There is the sense that with the university's extensive financial and professional resources, there is no limit placed on one's ability to teach the most effective way. There is, in the pounds-and-pence column, the possibility of some extra income to be earned on royalties from the set books and readers one creates for use in a course.

Administrators over the years at the Open University have learned that though students spend only about 10% of their study time on a course's television and radio offerings, these presentations require about 22% of course budgets.[15] They must be planned with care, therefore, and used only in areas where broadcast media are especially effective. The members of a course-team must know when and how to use them. Since Britons ordinarily turn to BBC radio for discussion programs and music, radio is the natural medium for

special talks by experts, for panels presenting various viewpoints simultaneously, and for musical performances.

Television's visual effectiveness is used in different ways by different faculties. For instance, TV provides Mathematics and Technology a way to couple abstract problems with their applications in real-life situations. Social Science academics prize television for its vivid presentation of actual case-studies filmed on the scene. Education likewise uses television to observe children, classrooms, and experienced teachers at work. Science needs television to demonstrate experiments close up, and to show processes of scientific change either in speeded-up or slowed-down form. The Arts use TV to present various kinds of performances to their students, to interview artists at work, and to go on field-trips to some site associated with a particular art work. An additional use in modern history courses is the presentation of actual archive film footage of historical material, bringing the student directly on the scene.

Programming of course material on radio is a fairly straightforward presentation of speakers or musical performances, and may be easily imagined by the reader of this paper. The nature of television programming for the Open University is harder to convey on the printed page, but perhaps a description of one such program will help to some extent.

The program "Bartholomew Fair" was made for a unit of Arts 322, English Urban History. It is basically a lecture-demonstration on functions of open-air fairs in urban areas. It is far from a simple photographing of a lecturer and his blackboard in a classroom. On a

small scale, one can say, and within the limits of a 25-minute length, the program uses the same sort of rapid, continual interplay between an interpreter of a subject and visual illustrations of his remarks found in Kenneth Clark's Civilisation or Jacob Bronowski's Ascent of Man. Its creators evidently assumed that their viewers would bring from everyday TV a sophisticated experience of productions at a high artistic and professional level, and that the Open University program must be at that high standard.

The program begins with a scene from Ben Jonson's play, Bartholomew Fair. A peddler and a market-woman in costume of Elizabethan times review their goods, their expected profits, and the likely nature of the fairgoers. A member of the A322 course team, Edward Heyward, appears on the scene in modern dress. He comments on what Jonson showed of the explosive growth of urban London in his time, and of the double function of such a fair: to provide a market for goods and a place of entertainment for the urban crowds. Comment on how the fair has persisted over the centuries comes in voice-over as the screen shows the Rowlandson painting of Bartholomew Fair in 1800, and then camera shots of the fair area as it looks today, lanes and booths clustering around St. Bartholomew church.

Another scene from Jonson, of a Puritan turning in distaste from the worldly vanities on sale, is followed by the lecturer's description of how the fair came to be disdained by the religious middle class, though it was the church which established the fair in the first place. His voice-over on the roisterous, sometimes bawdy tent theaters and puppet-stalls long associated with the fair brings

shots of old playbills and puppets, and still another scene from Jonson of a puppet-master joshing with a would-be blade from the country. The course-team member appears one more time to offer a summary of what the materials of the program can teach about the part fairs have played in the lives of English urban people. With that, the 25-minute program is over.

Besides numerous one-credit courses at the university's various levels of advancement toward a degree, the Open University has in recent years developed some auxiliary studies. Some, called "pre-experience" courses, are for older students, long away from schooling, who want a review of sixth-form (i.e., high school senior/college freshman) basics of the faculty they wish to enter. Others are designated by the university as "post-experience" courses and are in effect continuing-education offerings for adults who want enrichment but not a degree, or for professionals who wish to update their knowledge of their field. These courses are not usually a year in length. The university has, as a convenience to students, further set up some "half-credit" courses, which run a year but are supposed to require only half the usual amount of work. One of these may be taken concurrently with a regular one-credit course, so that students may speed up the completion of their advance to a degree. The broadcast media are used along with readings in print for all these. About 260 television programs, and 400 radio programs, are produced in all for courses each year.

Questionnaires sent to the student body over the years have built up a composite picture of the special Open University student: "the

average age . . . is thirty-four, and the proportion of female students (37.6 percent) is higher than the usual percentage of women students in the United Kingdom. About 30 percent of the students are teachers or members of a profession . . . laboratory technicians, scientists, engineers, and housewives are also well represented."[16] When the Open University first accepted students, they used a media "blitz" to acquaint the public with their offerings. Since then, word of mouth has sufficed as chief recruiter. Some students become interested in studying a course by first seeing or hearing its programs on the BBC. Special efforts are made to reach and serve students who have virtually no other access to higher education, such as the physically handicapped and inmates of prisons; these special categories are given priority access to available openings in the faculty of their choice.

One large body of British citizens not proportionately represented in the student body is the working class. This fact has distressed officials of the Open University, because laboring men and women were supposed to be the principal beneficiaries of the new institution. The university has advertised in the popular newspapers and magazines the working class reads, trying to reach workers through their accustomed reading material, but with little response. Surveys indicate that the lower-class workers see no real change likely to come to their lives as a result of study, and that they are not fond of schooling in any case. University officials can take some comfort from another survey finding about their middle-class student body: "if students are categorized by the occupation of their parents at

eighteen years of age, no fewer than 85 percent come from working-class origins."[17] This means that the enrollees have already managed to find an upwardly mobile path for themselves into some "middle-class" occupation, and now see the Open University degree as a means to qualify for even more of a rise.

Surveys show that not all enrollees have any idea of making a change in their occupations as a benefit from the degree. A significant number, it seems, simply see it as a challenge, and want to prove to themselves that they can successfully handle advanced study. A challenge the program certainly is. The conditions of study, and the academic excellence insisted on in all courses, make it an arduous undertaking. Some have called the Open University the most difficult way to earn a degree yet invented by the mind of man. A number of problems the adult students are apt to face may be enumerated.

First, there may be a "competing" home atmosphere which presents the student with all sorts of interruptions and discouragements. An enthusiastic and supportive family, willing to allow quiet study, to give up the television and radio at the time of course broadcasts, and to shoulder some of the student's usual household tasks, is virtually a prerequisite to success.

Second, many adults are keenly aware that they are out of the habit of learning. They fear failure, which they see as bringing ridicule from family and friends. Adverse comments from a tutor may easily discourage them from further efforts. Part of the training given local part-time tutors is "to adjust from the rougher frankness

with which younger students may be treated in a conventional university to the gentler protective mode necessary with adults."[18]

Third, the experience of acquiring new knowledge, and meeting others at tutorials or seminars doing the same, can bring significant changes of outlook. These in turn may bring changes in family and personal relations which may frighten the student and disrupt his personal life. A successful recent play in London's West End, Educating Rita, is about a young married woman who enrolls in the Open University. It presents this very experience in dramatic form.

Fourth, finding the time to study, from ten to twenty hours a week out of leisure time, may be hard to do. Taking a week for the summer seminar in residence may wipe out the family holiday time for the year, also.

Fifth, simple fatigue and the inertia that comes with it must be overcome regularly. The student must be strongly self-motivating to continue his lonely pursuit of learning over months and years.

Finally, nowhere else are students likely to have had significant amounts of course material presented by television. Open University students must make a radical readjustment from the usual attitude toward television watching, which says TV is an easy diversion to be viewed while relaxing. Besides recalling his old study habits, the student must also learn this new technique. The Open University together with the BBC has put out a special loose-leaf publication, Learning from Television, to help students master study skills for television. It identifies the seven functions a TV program may have (presenting a scientific experiment, substituting

for a field trip, presenting documentary material for student analysis, etc.) and, in workbook style, takes the student through all the steps to thorough study of such an offering. The IET has made intensive studies of ways students can learn efficiently, and members have produced two paperback books on the subject: Derek Rowntree's Learn to Study is addressed to students; Graham Gibbs' Teaching Students to Learn is addressed to members of the teaching profession.

The general program of study laid out for all Open University courses is designed to carry the student along as smoothly as possible. After acceptance in a faculty, the student is only provisionally enrolled in its foundation course. He has three months to decide whether he will proceed with it or not, and if he decides against it he loses only part of the course fee. Just the idea of an "early easy out" is soothing to nervous beginners. He receives by mail a package of the printed units for only four to six weeks at a time. This prevents discouragement over a huge pile of textual material, and despair at looking far ahead to some later difficult assignment. To vary the learning process, and to keep it from being an entirely passive one, students are assigned projects to complete which call for their active participation. Then also, students know they have access to a tutor (and counselors) at their local Open University Centre. Visits to the center are kept optional, however, in case time or transportation should be a barrier. Similarly, not all students are able to turn on all the media broadcasts, due to personal circumstances, nor can they even get to their centers for use of the broadcasts on cassettes. For that reason, units are carefully

designed so that a basic minimum of knowledge which will satisfy the requirements for the unit is available in the printed unit by itself.

Students are given opportunity to voice their feelings and frustrations about a course not only at tutorial meetings but also by way of the IET questionnaires they receive. There is also an "Open Forum" program for student opinion once a week on radio and once a month on television. The students must pass periodic examinations, which incite them to keep up a reasonable rate of progress, but they know that only the best two-thirds of their grades will be counted, which allows for the occasional off-day. What they may not know is that units are specially paced by the course-team so that the student will not be overwhelmed with materials to be mastered at any one time. The course is further designed so that no major assignment is brought in in the last week or two of the course, when students are already busy reviewing and synthesizing earlier work in preparation for the final exam. The week of summer residence also has the purpose of strengthening student resolution midway along, in what might otherwise become summer doldrums. The only convenience students do not have is a "hotline" toll-free telephone number to call for home assistance at the moment a problem appears in studying; toll-free numbers seem not to have arrived in Britain as yet.

The success of students at the Open University in adapting to distance-teaching and finally acquiring a respected degree, their enthusiasm for the way they are taught, and the public availability of so much of the teaching material has had a ripple effect on other higher education in Britain. Students in comparable courses

elsewhere have used the Open University materials to enrich their own learning, and as a basis for demands that their own course be brought up to Open University standard. Thus in institutions of higher learning all across Britain, faculties are reviewing their courses to bring them in line with the standards set at Milton Keynes. Teachers and future teachers in particular benefit from exposure to examples of unified, pre-tested, first-rate instruction. All this is in addition to the sheer educative enjoyment many Britons find in watching and listening to the media broadcasts without involving themselves in study at all.

The Open University has spread to other nations around the world, ever since its success became apparent. It is particularly used in countries where British models of all sorts have been followed since colonial days. A number of developing nations have adopted Open University courses as a shortcut to high-level education when their country has only a few native instructors trained in a foreign country. In a few unnamed places, Walter Perry notes, the suspicion must exist that repressive governments use the Open University courses and system so as to bring up the national level of education without creating a residential campus where radical student agitation on political issues might develop.[19]

Today, Open University faculty members and administrators are accustomed to being invited for consultation anywhere in the world. A unit called the Centre for International Cooperation and Service has been set up at Milton Keynes to handle the never-ending flow of requests for information and service.

Open University materials have only partly penetrated into the educational system of the U.S. There had been locally-devised telecourses in use here since the 1950's (for instance, Chicago's TV College). But many educators, particularly at prestigious institutions of higher learning, saw the educational level and the production level of U.S. telecourses as unacceptably low. They might have been expected to welcome the Open University courses; in fact, the Open University expected just that and in the early 1970's set up an elaborate project of marketing its courses through a major American publishing firm, Harper and Row. But the adoptions did not come, and the project eventually foundered and disappeared.

The difficulties in utilizing Open University courses here lie in the basic differences between the British and U.S. societies. We do not have a few national universities alone. Instead, America has a large range of universities and colleges serving a particular region or state, either publicly or privately supported. This abundance of schools of higher education means that conventional study of any sort, either for a degree or for enrichment, is much more accessible to American adults than it is to Britons. Also, in American universities a full-time student is expected to enroll in a number of different specialized courses, each counting typically for three credits. The full-time Open University course, awarding the equivalent of 15 credits per semester for a school year, cannot really be accommodated in such a system.

Other difficulties come from the different kinds of broadcasting in force in the two countries. The U.S. knows no such government-

controlled broadcasting facility as the BBC. Transmission on commercial stations goes on all hours of day and night, so that there is not the unused time available that the BBC has. The Public Broadcasting System, which might be receptive to broadcast of the Open University television courses, is found many times on a UHF channel which not all TV sets are able to receive. The same difference applies to BBC radio and U.S. radio, plus which the American public has long ceased to think of radio as a medium for anything but music, light chat, and news. Open University lecture broadcasts and panels by way of radio would be difficult for American listeners to grow accustomed to.

Another area of difference is the level of postal service, and fast distribution service, available in the two countries. The U.S. does not offer a postal service equal to the efficiency of Britain's Post Office. In part, this is due to the sheer difference of size in the two countries. Mail and packages have to travel much further here to reach a national distribution. Air mail is available, but at a cost prohibitive for bulk mailings of Open University units, books and kits. The distance materials must cover is a crucial factor. Once, in the Open University's first year, the British Post Office workers went on strike for weeks, and no mailing of units was possible. Due to the smaller size of Britain, the university was nevertheless able to send all its materials by trucks to the regional centers, from which they went to the small local centers, and thence into the hands students who came to pick them up, with almost no delay. Can anyone

imagine that taking place over the distances of the North American continent?

The thinner distribution of population in the U.S. is another deterrent to adoption of Open University courses by universities here. Walter Perry has estimated that to reach an enrollment level which will allow anything like the full economy of scale attained in Britain, an American institution must be able to draw on a population base of twenty million people.[20] Only in a few of the largest metropolitan centers is that number available to a single institution. The other way to achieve that population base is for a number of a region's institutions to co-operate in offering certain Open University courses, which means setting up a joint tutorial system that would be difficult to regulate and administer. Most universities and colleges prize their autonomy, furthermore, and would be reluctant to offer courses devised in a foreign country and administered by functionaries of other dissimilar institutions.

Much more success has been attained in U.S. adoptions of some particular unit of a particular course as a module within a course devised by American academics. This has taken place at Rutgers, at University of Maryland, at the regional universities around Nebraska, and a number of other places. A body calling itself the National University Consortium has begun nationwide offering of a range of courses adapted from Open University materials. Even in such cases, however, it must be noted that academics have insisted some broadcast and print modules be reworked to de-emphasize their British origins and bring them more into line with American conditions.

In the end, the impact of the Open University on American education may be mainly a matter of influence through the models of distance teaching it provides. The quality and the care that go into all Open University print and broadcast materials must almost inevitably bring up the quality of American educational telecourses, by showing what it is possible to do. In time, then, co-productions of courses between the Open University and American faculties, to fit both American and British students, might come into being. The Open University has already co-produced some courses with Miami-Dade County Community College and U.C.L.A., though these early efforts cannot be accounted entirely successful, according to Robert Rowland of the Open University's BBC unit. Presumably the ambitious new TV-education project of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, drawing on a gift of $150 million dollars from Walter Annenberg, will show the influence of Open University standards and techniques--but to what extent, and in what ways, is unclear as yet.

Some form of education by broadcast media and distance teaching is likely to win increasing acceptance in the U.S. in years to come. The figures on the balance sheet are too attractive not to lure university administrators facing the prospect of rising costs and falling enrollments. Also, adult learners here as in Britain are used to television and radio in their homes. Many who would never find the courage to venture onto a college campus to begin learning again might be attracted to study by courses offered by media and correspondence. Once having proven themselves there, the return to a campus for conventional courses might seem to adults more within the range of

possibility for them. Thus a new area of recruitment could be opened up. The attractiveness would be especially strong if the media offerings are at the high professional standard they have attained in the Open University, thus causing adult learners to lose the impression of academic dryness and stuffiness they may have carried away from earlier experiences of learning.

Resistance to telecourses such as the Open University offers is most likely to come from the instructional faculty at the various institutions trying the media road to education. Professors now are used to creating a course more or less to suit their own ideas of how some subject should be taught. To have that creative function taken away from them, to be compelled to teach whatever material came in the alien "package," to find themselves in effect reduced to being paper-graders for someone else's teaching would be a staggering change for American academics. It is one they would not be likely to accept quietly. If nothing else, it would involve horrendous problems of determining bases for tenure and promotion, those foundation stones of America's higher-educational system.

Even if some way is eventually found to involve more American academics in the design of a telecourse, a number of legal questions would remain which would have to be worked out in terms of U.S. law. Who owns the course materials created? Who determines when it is time for a course to be revised or dropped? What royalties are to be paid, either to an institution or its faculty? Who is to be responsible for material found erroneous or deemed libelous? So litigious is American society that expensive suits would probably

arise in all these areas, and would cause the universities and colleges making use of telecourse teaching to lose the low-cost advantage of that system.

Then also, so market-minded is American society that sales teams for competing courses originated at various places might be as intensely competitive as university football teams are now. This could well involve the commercializing of courses in ways which might broaden their appeal but work against their academic quality.

In the meantime, the Open University of Great Britain continues as a shining success fitted to British society very well. It has opened doors previously shut against many Britons. It helps Britain maintain its tradition of world service, even in the new conditions of twentieth-century reliance on mass media. Even if its courses will not transplant successfully to other countries such as the U.S., the example of its blend of media and distance teaching, and the example of its high professional standards, have set a pattern which it seems will long be of influence.

Note on documentation: Information for this paper was gathered from many sources, more than I can indicate without having a footnote numeral at the end of every sentence. I have limited footnoting to citations for direct quotations of other people's words, to citation of sources for specific percentages and figures used, and to indications of sources particularly valuable for fuller treatment of a certain point. I have listed all the sources I consulted in the Bibliography.

NOTES

[1] Basic information about the Open University is to be found in a number of sources. Four I have found particularly valuable are John Ferguson, The Open University from Within; Walter Perry, "Open University" entry, The International Encyclopedia of Higher Education (hereafter cited as Perry, Inter. Ency.); Walter Perry, The Open University (hereafter cited as Perry, Open U.); Jeremy Tunstall, ed., The Open University Opens.

[2] Robert Rowland, Director of BBC Television for the Open University, speaking at Temple University Seminar on British Mass Media, London, July 12, 1982.

[3] Leslie Wagner, "The Economics of the Open University Revisited," 374.

[4] Ferguson, p. 41.

[5] Sir Harold Wilson, "Foreword" in Perry, Open U., p. vii.

[6] Brian MacArthur, "An Interim History of the Open University," in Tunstall, pp. 5-6.

[7] See especially Perry, Open U., pp. 1-50, and MacArthur section in Tunstall.

[8] Perry, Open U., p. xv.

[9] Slogan used by Rowland, July 12, 1982.

[10] Perry, Open U., p. 63.

[11] Rowland, in conversation with the author at Milton Keynes, July 26, 1982.

[12] Ferguson, p. 39.

[13] Ferguson, p. 50.

[14] Ferguson, p. 44.

[15] Esther Kitses and Helen Knox, Britain's Open University . . . ., p. 19.

[16] Perry, Inter. Ency., p. 3104.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Jennifer Rogers, "Accounting for Themselves" in Tunstall, p. 78.

[19] Perry, Open U., p. 96.

[20] Kitses and Knox, p. 16.

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